Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
406-454-5840
FAX: 406-761-8477
28 September, 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department (MFWP) proposes to receive a gift of land from the Leroy B. Beckman Estate in accordance with Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament. This gift of land (fee title) constitutes 2129 acres formerly known as the Fertterer Property in Fergus County, Montana. The land is located approximately 9 miles ENE of Denton and adjoins the existing MFWP Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

Consistent with terms outlined by Mr. Beckman, the land is to be managed by MFWP for "WINTER-SUMMER range lands PRIMARILY FOR DEER, and as a "Public Hunting Ground". MFWP proposes to add the land and its subsequent need for management to its existing complement of public Wildlife Management Areas in north central Montana as the Beckman WMA.

Enclosed are an Environmental Assessment and a preliminary Management Plan for your review. Public comment is welcome and will be received through October 31, 2000.

Please send any written comments to the following address:

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
% Beckman WMA
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

A public hearing regarding the receipt of this gift will be held at 7:00p.m, October 11, 2000 at the Denton Community Hall, Denton, Montana.

Sincerely,

Graham Taylor
Regional Wildlife Manager,
Great Falls, Montana

Fergus 9

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Wildlife Division

Draft Environmental Assessment

BECKMAN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA
PROPOSED ACQUISITION

Incorporating:
Fertterer Property

I. INTRODUCTION

Mr. LeRoy Byron Beckman's Last Will and Testament established the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund to acquire lands for deer and public hunting. Mr. Beckman's Will instructed Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) to assist in locating these lands, and that the lands should be within Fergus, Judith Basin, Cascade, or Meagher Counties; mountain or valley lands; that are partly timbered; that has a stream running through it; and that the lands be comparable in cost to other lands in the area. Mr. Beckman further instructed that after the land was acquired the title and management be transferred to MFWP.

Within the 4 identified counties, MFWP personnel originally completed a thorough examination of numerous properties that were known to be for sale and that might meet Mr. Beckman's conditions. Of them, the Steiners' Trail's End Ranch was the best match. It's purchase was recommended by MFWP. The RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund purchased the property June 7, 1999. That property was then accepted by the Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission as a gift and added to the State's system of Wildlife Management Areas.

Additional property lying adjacent to the Steiners' Trail's End Ranch became available following the Steiner acquisition. This property, the Fertterer Property, complements the original intent and purpose of the Beckman Will by providing additional deer habitat in a manner similar to the Steiner Property. It features riparian and sagebrush-grassland communities and functionally complements the original acquisition.

Since the Fertterer Property includes riparian and sagebrush plant communities, as well as meets the terms of Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament, and further builds upon the ability to produce and harvest deer, the MFWP Region 4 Supervisor recommends that the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission accept transfer of fee title and management of the Property from the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund, and that the property be added to the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

II. AUTHORITY AND DIRECTION

MFWP is authorized by statute (87-1-201) to protect, enhance and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed HB526 that authorizes and regulates wildlife habitat leases, conservation easements, and/or fee title acquisition (87-1-241 and 242). The Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission and the State Land Board must approve any acquisition of land proposed by the agency. This Environmental Assessment is part of the decision making process.

III. LOCATION OF PROJECT and PHYSIOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The proposed Property is 2,129 acres located in the Judith River breaks, Fergus County, 9 miles northeast of Denton, Montana (see map Appendix I). It adjoins the existing Beckman Wildlife Management Area, sharing 4.75 miles of common boundary. It consists of steep-sided coulees with ridges and gently sloping benches that drain into the bottoms of the WMA. Acquisition of the Fertterer Property will functionally consolidate into one ownership the headwaters of 3 major coulees found on the WMA.

Elevations range from 3100 to 3940 feet. Soils are generally deep well drained clay loams. Annual precipitation ranges from 12 to 16 inches. The mean temperature is 44 degrees Fahrenheit. The average frost-free period is 120 to 130 days.

Legal description of the proposed Project property:

County: Fergus

TOWNSHIP 18 NORTH, RANGE 16 EAST, M.P.M.

Section 5: NW1/4, NW1/4SW1/4, W1/2NE1/4
Section 6: SE1/4NE1/4, Lots 1,2,3,4, and 5

TOWNSHIP 18 NORTH, RANGE 15 EAST, M.P.M.
Section 1: SE1/4NE1/4, E1/2SE1/4
Section 12: W1/2NE1/4,NE1/4NW1/4, S1/2NW1/4, NW1/4SE1/4, N1/2SW1/4

TOWNSHIP 19 NORTH, RANGE 16 EAST, M.P.M.
Section 28: NE1/4NE1/4, S1/2N1/2, N1/2SE1/4, SW1/4
Section 29: SE1/4NE1/4, E1/2SE1/4
Section 31: Lots 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14, E1/2SW1/4
Section 32: Lots 3, 4, NE1/4NE1/4
Section 33: NW1/4NW1/4

Total Deeded = 2,129.45 acres

The accompanying map (Appendix I) displays the lands affected by the proposal. The project's exterior boundary is irregularly shaped, broken into two disjunct parcels both of which border the existing WMA. It is bordered by 8 different landowners. One county road runs through the property for 3.0 miles. One State School Trust section (Department of Natural Resources and Conservation) lies adjacent to the property. The DNRC section is not obligated or leased to the Fertterer Property or its current owners.

IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROJECT

The proposed Property is upland river breaks habitat, consisting of 2 major vegetative types. A ponderosa pine / Douglas fir-juniper type occurs on the more moist ridges and coulees and a sagebrush-grassland type occurs on the drier benches, side hills, and terraces. Commercially suitable timber stands were logged in 1993. Some of the grassland terraces on the west end of the property have been cultivated into dryland alfalfa or tame grass hay fields.

Because the proposed property has steep terrain with several aspects, these vegetative types produce a diversity of plant species that offer quality deer forage through all seasons in most years. Consequently, the property is year-round habitat for as many as 80 mule deer and 20 white-tailed deer (and almost twice that number during early spring and late summers when deer are drawn to lush, green vegetation.) Sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge are common on the property. Pronghorn Antelope, Ring-necked pheasants, Merriam's Turkey, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, fox, badger, and skunk use the property, as do a diverse group of small mammals and birds. A list of wildlife species potentially using this area is contained in Appendix II.

Every year, all across central and eastern Montana, finding places to hunt becomes more difficult. A turbulent agricultural economy induces some landowners to charge fees, outfit, or lease the hunting rights to others. Many ranches are being purchased by people from out of the area. They are typically less receptive to public hunting. And many ranches, with similar wildlife resources and scenery, are being subdivided.

In the immediate area around Denton, Montana, there is little public land available to the public for recreation. Excluding the occasional tract of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation land that's located on a public road, the closest legally accessible public land for deer hunting is at least 30 miles away. Public lands available for upland bird hunting or other recreational activities are also very scarce. The proposal property does have good public access via a county road that bisects its west flank. Acquiring this property would immediately and significantly improve recreational opportunities in central Montana.

Since the Property contains riparian and sagebrush-grassland habitat relative to the Habitat Montana classification of important and/or threatened habitats in Montana, and since the property is very good "WINTER-SUMMER range lands PRIMARILY FOR DEER", the property is most worthy of Mr. Beckman's vision that the land be "used for Wildlife Conservation purposes and as a Public Hunting Ground", and that it "shall be held in PERPETUITY".

V. SCOPE FOR THE PROJECT

Conserve and enhance land, water, and wildlife:

(1) The Property contains 2,129 acres. It will be managed in perpetuity to enhance soils, water, vegetation, and wildlife species' habitats for the benefit of the general public.

(2) The current condition of the habitat is fair to good. Areas near water sources have been heavily utilized by livestock and are in fair condition. Due to pasture configuration and past ranch management some pastures have received disproportionately higher levels of grazing and are only in fair condition. Vegetation condition is better (good) in more remote, steep areas and farther from watering sources. About 40 percent of the property is in good condition.

(3) Wildlife species of major interest are: mule deer, white-tailed deer, Hungarian partridge, pronghorn antelope and sharp-tailed grouse. Species that are seasonally on the property and/or are not abundant are Ring-necked pheasant, Merriam's turkey, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, fox, badger, skunk and a variety of non-game birds and mammals.

(4) Population objectives for the major wildlife species are: 100 mule deer and 30 white-tailed deer during fall, before hunting season. Current populations are estimated to be about 80% of objective for both species. Spring sharp-tailed grouse numbers are not known. The objective is to increase spring grouse counts by 2X in succeeding years. Other wildlife species that are adapted to more residual and woody vegetative cover, as well as to agricultural crops such as alfalfa, will likely increase.

Contribute to hunting opportunity:

(1) The Property is accessible to the general public via a county road through its west flank, via foot travel from adjacent private lands with landowner permission and via the adjoining Beckman WMA. Additional foot access may be pursued through enrollment of neighboring properties into MFWPs Block Management Program.

(2) During the past decade the most mule deer harvested on the property during one hunting season was approximately 20 males and 5 females. For white-tailed deer during one season it was approximately 2 males and 2 females. Annual harvest of grouse and partridge is unknown.

The harvest objective for mule deer will start at 15 males and 5 females, and for white-tailed deer the objective will start at 5 males. These species' populations, and their harvest, will be surveyed and monitored annually. Harvest objectives may be changed accordingly.

Over time, as game populations respond to increased forage quantity and quality, hunting recreation should at least double, primarily because of the expected increase in the number of upland bird hunters. Hunting recreation for deer and upland birds alone is anticipated to reach 400 hunter days per year.

Contribute to non-hunting recreation:

(1) Hiking, picnicking, camping, bird watching, wildlife observing, horseback riding, and antler and flower picking will be available to the general public from April 1 through December 15.

(2) The number of non-hunting recreation days provided is anticipated to be 150 days annually.

Protect open space and scenic areas:

(1) These vegetation and topographic features provide diverse and unique examples of native habitats greatly threatened by recreational homesite development. The breaks and riparian vegetative types are excellent wildlife habitat that is attractive to wealthy hunters who want to own a private hunting ranch, or to outfitters wishing to increase their client base or client success/satisfaction. Such interests have been expressed or intended.

Maintain local tax base, while demonstrating productive wildlife habitat is compatible with agriculture and other land uses:

(1) Since the historic land use has been limited to a single-family livestock operation, the change in tax dollars remitted to Fergus County when the property becomes a Wildlife Management Area, if different, will be minor. An annual "in lieu of taxes" payment will be made by MFWP to Fergus County in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen (MCA 87-1-603).

(2) The primary goal for the property will be to improve the condition and productivity of all vegetative plant communities. This will increase the carrying capacity for deer and cattle. Since cattle grazing will be used as a tool to enhance the vegetation for wildlife, the actual reduction in the number of cattle grazed in the County may not be consequential. The number of acres that are farmed and/or hayed will be maintained, therefore the production and agricultural income from the property will remain the same as if privately owned.

Other Management Implications:

(1) The subject property has been managed as a satellite, two-season 150 pair cow/calf operation. Hay production has been ancillary to the needs of the cow base. MFWP intends to maintain dryland alfalfa hay production as well as rotate small grain crops on those same acres. To improve range condition on the property, MFWP will implement a grazing system that incorporates new pasture layouts with more rest and rotation. Those pastures may incorporate existing range on the Beckman WMA. All of these practices will supplement the local agricultural economy.

(2) Several species of noxious weeds are found on the subject property. MFWP will endeavor to stop the spread and reduce the occurrence of noxious weeds on the property. Biological, chemical, and mechanical treatments will be used.

(3) No significant increase in MFWP manpower is expected relative to the acquisition and management of the proposed property. Management practices will dovetail with the existing Beckman WMA. The Department will make physical improvements only as time and manpower allow. Other physical improvements may be accomplished in conjunction with haying and grazing leases with private agricultural producers. MFWP often contracts with private local businesses for materials and labor when fencing, road work or other on-ground improvements are necessary.

(4) A proposed travel plan calls for maintaining the open county road for normal travel but imposing a seasonal off-road closure of the property from December 16 through March 31.

VI. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT CHECKLIST

	POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT					
ON ITEM: PAGES	MAJOR	MOD.	MINOR	NONE	UNK.	COMMENTS ATTACHED
TERRESTRIAL & AQUATIC LIFE & HABITATS	X					X

WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY, & DISTRIBUTION	X			X
GEOLOGY & SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY, & MOISTURE	X			X
VEGETATION COVER, QUALITY, & QUANTITY	X			X
AESTHETICS		X		X
AIR QUALITY			X	
DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL			X	
RESOURCES OF LAND WATER, AIR, & ENERGY			X	

VII. EXPLANATION OF IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

TERRESTRIAL AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS

Positive and major impacts to mule deer, white-tailed deer, upland game birds, native species' habitats, and aquatic habitats will occur as a result of management emphasis directed to improve vegetation communities for the benefit of both species of deer and upland game birds.

WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY, AND DISTRIBUTION

Water quality and quantity will improve with controlled livestock grazing that leaves more residual cover in the uplands and riparian areas. Site-specific water impoundments may receive additional fenced protection from livestock use.

GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY, AND MOISTURE

Major and positive impacts to soil conditions will occur due to reduced livestock trampling in riparian areas and increased forage remaining following grazing treatments. Increased amounts of residual vegetation over the entire area will improve soil fertility, quality, stability, and moisture retention.

VEGETATION COVER, QUALITY, AND QUANTITY

Positive and major impacts to mule deer, white-tailed deer, upland game birds, native species' habitats, and aquatic habitats will occur as a result of management emphasis directed to improve vegetation communities for the benefit of both species of deer and upland game birds. Because deer select/consume more browse and forbs than cattle, increased carrying

capacity for deer as a consequence of changed livestock grazing will not nullify the improved vegetative condition.

AESTHETICS

Improvement of the visual quality of the area will occur as a result of improved vegetative composition, quantity, and quality.

VIII. HUMAN ENVIRONMENTAL CHECKLIST

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

ON ITEM: PAGES	MAJOR	MOD.	MINOR	NONE	UNK.	COMMENTS ATTACHED
SOCIAL STRUCTURES & MORES				X		
CULTURAL UNIQUENESS & DIVERSITY				X		
LOCAL & STATE TAX BASE & TAX REVENUE			X			X
AGRICULTURAL OR INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION				X		
HUMAN HEALTH				X		
ACCESS TO & QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL & WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES	X					X
QUANTITY & DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT				X		
DISTRIBUTION & DENSITY OF POPULATION & HOUSING				X		
DEMANDS FOR ENERGY				X		
LOCALLY ADAPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS/GOALS				X		
TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS & TRAFFIC FLOWS			X			X

IX. EXPLANATION OF IMPACTS TO THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUE

MFWP will make annual tax payments to Fergus in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen (MCA 87-1-603). A slight reduction in the number of cattle grazed in the county may occur, though private agricultural operators who lease grazing on the property may actually increase their livestock numbers. Production of hay and small grain is expected to remain stable. Having the Property open to public recreation will increase income to local merchants and businesses. Cumulatively, this will be a minor positive effect on tax revenues.

AGRICULTURAL OR INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION

Hay and grain production will not change, and the anticipated improvement in range condition and production will allow continued livestock production while simultaneously improving wildlife production.

ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES

Improved recreational opportunities will occur as a result of public ownership of the project area. Compared to past recreational opportunities, the impact will be a major improvement for the public.

TRANSPORTATION NETWORK AND TRAFFIC FLOWS

During the fall hunting season there will a minor increase in vehicular traffic to the property. During the winter there will be noticeably less vehicular traffic to the property. During the spring/summer period vehicular traffic will probably be unchanged compared to past traffic flows. All in all the impact will be minor.

X. DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF REASONABLE ALTERNATIVES

1. No Action Alternative:

The "No Action" alternative would not preserve or enhance the diversity of wildlife habitats on the property for perpetuity. The "No Action" alternative would not preserve or enhance the general public's recreational opportunities in perpetuity. This alternative would not honor Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament.

2. Fee Title Acquisition Alternative: (Preferred Alternative)

To comply with Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament, the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund desires to transfer fee title and management of the property to MFWP. The "Preferred" alternative would grant this transfer,

and the property would be incorporated into the existing Beckman Wildlife Management Area. It would be managed primarily for deer and deer hunting. This alternative also meets important habitat objectives of MFWP.

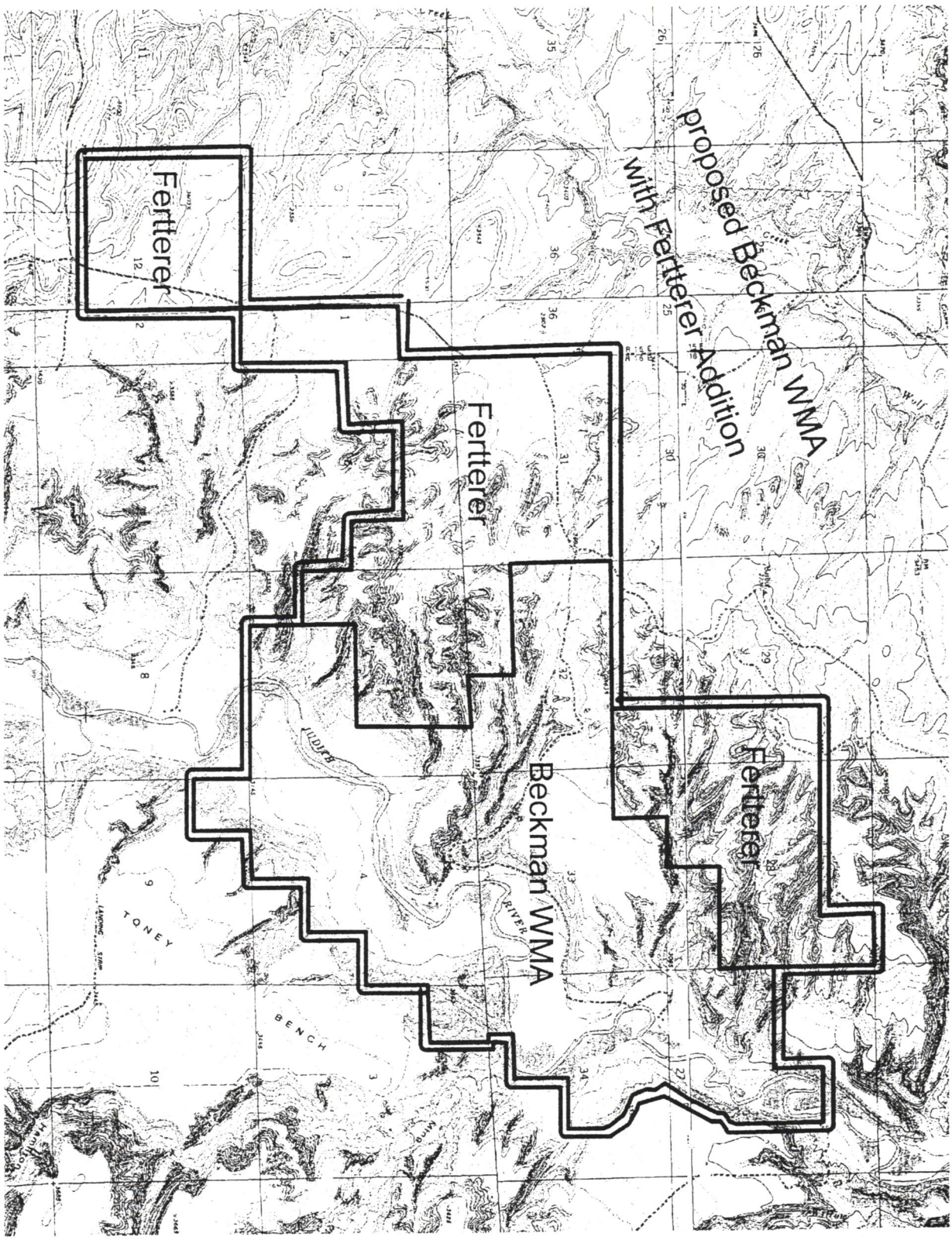
XI. EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN EIS

Based on the environmental assessment (EA), there will not be any significant negative impacts from the proposed action. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required and an EA is the appropriate level of review. The overall impact from the successful completion of the proposed action would provide substantial long-term benefits to both the physical and human environment.

XII. SCHEDULED PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A public hearing will be conducted on October 11, 2000 in Denton, MT. Duration of the comment period for the Draft Environmental Assessment is 30 days. The public comment period is October 1 through October 31, 2000.

Appendix I


proposed Beckman WMA
with Fertterer Addition
Fertterer
Fertterer
Fertterer
Beckman WMA
TONEY
BENCH
RIVER

APPENDIX II

Species listed below occur on the Beckman Wildlife Management Area, to include the Fertterer Property

Mammals

Common shrew
Montana shrew
Little brown myotis
Long-eared myotis
Long-legged myotis
Small-footed myotis
Big brown bat
Hoary bat
Silver-haired bat
Townsend's big-eared bat
Ermine
Long-tailed weasel
Mink
River otter
Badger
Striped skunk
Red fox
Coyote
Mountain lion
Bobcat
Racoon
Yellow-bellied marmot
Richardson's ground squirrel
Yellow-pine chipmunk
Red squirrel
Northern pocket gopher
Deer mouse
Bushy-tailed wood rat
Ord's kangaroo rat
Meadow vole
Gapper's red-backed vole
Montane vole
Prairie vole
Sagebrush vole
Western jumping mouse
Grasshopper mouse
Beaver
Muskrat
Porcupine
White-tailed jackrabbit
Mountain cottontail
Elk
White-tailed deer
Mule deer
Moose
Pronghorn

Birds (yearlong, seasonal, migratory)

Pintail
Mallard
Gadwall
Blue-winged teal
Cinnamon teal
Green-winged teal
Northern shoveler
American wigeon
Wood duck
Common goldeneye
Common merganser
Canada goose
Great blue heron
Sandhill crane
Common snipe
Turkey vulture
Northern harrier
Sharp-shinned hawk
Cooper's hawk
Brown creeper
Rock wren
Northern goshawk
Swainson's hawk
Red-tailed hawk
Ferruginous hawk
Rough-legged hawk
Bald eagle
Golden eagle
American kestrel
Merlin
Prairie falcon
Gray partridge
Blue grouse
Ruffed grouse
Sharp-tailed grouse
Sage grouse
Merriam's turkey
Ring-necked pheasant
Killdeer
Solitary sandpiper
Long-billed curlew
Rock dove
Mourning dove
Great horned owl
Long-eared owl
Northern pygmy-owl
Short-eared owl
Northern saw-whet owl
Burrowing owl
Common nighthawk
Common poorwill
Rufous hummingbird
Belted kingfisher
Lewis' woodpecker
Yellow-bellied sapsucker
Downy woodpecker
Hairy woodpecker
Northern flicker
Western wood-peewee
Hammond's flycatcher
Dusky flycatcher
Western flycatcher
Say's phoebe
Western kingbird
Eastern kingbird
Horned lark
Tree swallow
Violet-green swallow
Cliff swallow
Barn swallow
Rough-winged swallow
Blue jay
Gray jay
Steller's jay
Pinyon jay
Clark's nutcracker
Black-billed magpie
American crow
Common raven
Black-capped chickadee
Mountain chickadee
Red-breasted nuthatch
White-breasted nuthatch
House wren
Golden-crowned kinglet
Ruby-crowned kinglet
Eastern bluebird
Townsend's solitaire
Swainson's thrush
Hermit thrush
American robin
Gray catbird
Sprague's pipit
Bohemian waxwing
Cedar waxwing
Northern shrike
Loggerhead shrike
European starling
Warbling vireo
Solitary vireo
Yellow warbler
Yellow-rumped warbler
McGillivary's warbler
Common yellowthroat
Wilson's warbler
Western tanager
Lazuli bunting
Spotted towhee
American tree sparrow
Chipping sparrow
Clay-colored sparrow
Brewer's sparrow
Vesper sparrow
Lark sparrow
Savannah sparrow
Grasshopper sparrow
Fox sparrow
Song sparrow
White-crowned sparrow
Dark-eyed junco
Lapland longspur
Snow bunting
Red-winged blackbird
Bobolink
Western meadowlark
Brewer's blackbird
Common grackle
Brown-headed cowbird
Rosy finch
Cassin's finch
House finch
Red crossbill
Common redpoll
Pine siskin
American goldfinch
House sparrow

Amphibians

Tiger salamander
Woodhouse's toad
Western chorus frog
Northern leopard frog

Reptiles

Short-horned lizard
Snapping turtle
Racer
Milk snake
Gopher snake
Western rattlesnake
Common garter snake

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN
for the
BECKMAN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

Incorporating:
Fertterer Property

INTRODUCTION

LeRoy Byron Beckman's Last Will and Testament established the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund to acquire "WINTER-SUMMER range lands PRIMARILY FOR DEER, as a Public Hunting Ground". Mr. Beckman's Will then instructs the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund to transfer the title and management of the land to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP).

Because of the 1987 Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Act (House Bill 526) the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission adopted rules that specify a Preliminary Management Plan be written before any final action shall be taken on newly acquired lands. This Preliminary Management Plan is intended to give an immediate general analysis and to provide the basis for public comment. It is proposed that MFWP accept as a gift the 2,129 acre Fertterer Property from the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund and incorporate it into the adjacent Beckman Wildlife Management Area.

The Preliminary Management Plan identifies MFWP's management goals for the property. More specific work activities will be formulated for the final Management Plan after proper inventories have been made, compliance requirements met, and after public comments have been reviewed. The final Management Plan will be available for public review prior to being approved by the Commission. Once the final Management Plan is in place, it will be reviewed periodically and necessary adjustments incorporated.

After the Steiners' Trail's End Ranch was purchased and gifted to MFWP in 1999, it became the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (BWMA). The BWMA is managed by MFWP, primarily for mule and white-tailed deer and upland game birds. Agricultural practices such as producing hay and grazing livestock, are used as necessary to meet habitat objectives for the primary wildlife species, and for other wildlife species when appropriate.

AREA DESCRIPTION

Location and Physiographic Characteristics:

The Fertterer Property (Property) is 2,129 acres located in the Judith River breaks, Fergus

County, 9 miles northeast of Denton, Montana (see map Appendix 1). Combined with the adjacent Beckman WMA, total acreage will equal 4,694. The Property lies in two disjunct parcels, both of which have a common boundary with the WMA. A 680 acre parcel of the Property will newly define the north boundary of the WMA. To the west, lands that leave the 'river breaks' habitat and enter more gradual grassland benches will define the new western WMA boundary.

The Judith River flows from the southwest to the northeast across 3.6 miles of the existing WMA. Along the river are almost 1000 acres of bottomlands. The remaining acres are classified as river breaks, including most of the Fertterer Property. These breaks consist of steep-sided coulees with ridges and gently sloping benches that drain into the bottoms. There are 12 coulees that run water intermittently, in which there are 7 perennial springs. The Fertterer Property will substantially complete acquisition of the headwaters of three of the largest coulees flowing into the WMA west of the Judith River. The WMA's east boundary is a bluff, 200 feet high, overlooking the river.

Elevations of the Property range from 3,100 to 3,940 feet. Bottomlands along the Judith River run at elevations from 3020 to 3100 feet. Soils are generally deep well drained clay loams. Annual precipitation ranges from 12 to 16 inches. The mean temperature is 44 degrees Fahrenheit. The average frost-free period is 120 to 130 days.

Legal description of the proposed project property:

County: Fergus

TOWNSHIP 18 NORTH, RANGE 16 EAST, M.P.M.

Section 5: NW1/4, NW1/4SW1/4, W1/2NE1/4
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Section 32: Lots 3, 4, NE1/4NE1/4
Section 33: NW1/4NW1/4

Total Deeded = 2,129 acres

The accompanying map (Appendix 1) displays the lands affected by the proposal. The project's exterior boundary is irregularly shaped and will be 19 miles in length with addition of

the Fertterer Property. Twelve different private landowners control property bordering the WMA with its Fertterer addition. A county road runs through the Fertterer Property and into the center of the WMA, where it dead-ends at the headquarter buildings. There are no state or federal lands encumbered or leased in conjunction with this Property or the WMA.

Vegetation

Present

The Beckman WMA is described as river breaks habitat, consisting of 3 major vegetative types. The Ponderosa pine / Douglas fir-juniper type occurs on the more moist aspects of ridges and coulees. A grassland type occupies the drier benches and sidehills and is dominated by western wheatgrass, needle-and-thread and blue grama. Most of the river bottom riparian type consists of cottonwood / willow stands (about 250 acres) and grassland terraces (about 400 acres). The cottonwood / willow stands also have understory vegetation comprised of western snowberry, Wood's rose, chokecherry, silver buffaloberry, and red osier dogwood. Most riparian grassland terraces have been cultivated into alfalfa and tame grass hay fields.

The Fertterer Property is represented by both the Ponderosa pine / Douglas fir-juniper and the grassland types, lacking any river bottom. Three sharply dissected coulees with minimal streamside vegetation in their bottoms are included on the Property. Commercially valuable stands of pine and fir were logged on the Property in 1993.

These vegetative types and their associated topographic features make the combined properties year-round habitat for mule and white-tailed deer. Sharp-tailed grouse and pronghorn antelope make significant use of the grassy upland benches. Merriam's turkeys, although uncommon, favor the pine/fir sites. Ring-necked pheasants make extensive use of the riparian vegetation on the river bottom. All of the vegetative types are utilized by a diverse group of small mammals and birds.

The Fertterer Property is currently managed as a satellite cow/calf operation. Approximately 150 cow/calf pairs are grazed seasonally (June-December) in 4 separate pastures. During years of adequate moisture, 419 acres of dryland alfalfa can be cut and harvested for hay. Cattle are usually pastured on the hay fields from late summer through December. Range condition is fair on most of the property, improving to good as distance from water sources increases.

Future

Because the native upland and riparian vegetation need some improvement relative to plant vigor and species composition, the Fertterer property will be rested from livestock grazing upon completion of contractual obligations. That obligation is to seasonally graze these

same pastures through 2002. Range condition, cattle stocking rates, and pasture configuration will then be reevaluated. Riparian areas will be fenced so cattle grazing/utilization can be deferred and/or more precisely managed. A grazing system will be designed and implemented to improve the condition and occurrence of desired woody and herbaceous plant species in all vegetative types. Such a grazing system will probably incorporate pasture rotation and rest and the development of stock watering facilities that are located outside of riparian areas. Cattle grazing of the riparian areas is expected to be lighter than in the past. Cattle grazing will be implemented only as it applies to the improvement of habitat conditions for deer.

To rectify a weed problem on one upland bench, at least 19 acres will probably be farmed to a small grain crop for 2 years and then reseeded to a grass or grass/legume mixture. Between 20 and 30 acres of the irrigated alfalfa hay fields will also be farmed in small grains each year, for 2-year periods. Other upland sites of dryland alfalfa on the Fertterer Property will be managed for continued hay production in combination with cattle grazing. Approximately 50 acres of fallow ground will be seeded in 2001 back to dryland alfalfa, continuing current cultural practices. This will maintain vigorous stands of alfalfa, while increasing forage diversity for wildlife, particularly deer and upland birds. To further enhance deer and upland bird habitat on the river bottom terraces, native plant species (primarily chokecherry, buffaloberry and juniper) will be planted in shelterbelts.

The most productive irrigable alfalfa hay land (about 120 acres) will be irrigated, and possibly fertilized, each year by a lessee. To insure maximum production and yield and regrowth available for wildlife, there will be 2 cuttings of hay that will be irrigated before, between and after. Harvested hay will be immediately removed from the property when haying is completed.

The above described grazing and haying schedule will attract and hold deer on the property throughout most years. Improved vegetative condition, early green-up of the range and hay fields, regrowth of alfalfa after haying, and the increased amount of forage provided by palatable shrubs in the coulees and on the river bottoms will help alleviate deer use on adjacent landowners' crop and pasture lands.

Travel Plan

Present

Motor vehicle access on the existing WMA is by means of one graveled county road that enters on the western border and continues into the center of the property, ending at the WMA headquarter buildings on the river bottom. Another vehicular trail splits off of the county road and provides access to the north portion of the WMA, ending in a designated parking area. Other unimproved dirt roads on the Property lead to almost every field or pasture.

Road use on the Fertterer Property mimics that of the WMA, including the county road running through it to the WMA and assorted dirt tracks. These tracks were constructed in association with past logging practices and have been, with one exception, allowed to revegetate.

Future

Motorized vehicles will be allowed seasonally on the two existing designated roads on the WMA. These roads will lead to 2 designated parking areas located on the river bottom at road end (Map 1). Continued access along the county road as it passes the Fertterer Property will be allowed. Public access by foot or horseback will be allowed off-road from April 1 to December 15, annually, on all acres.

Motorized vehicles will not be allowed off of the designated roads except for authorized MFWP personnel and/or the current agricultural lessees or contractors.

Camping is allowed on the Beckman WMA in any of the designated parking areas. Camping rules comply with MFWP Administrative Rule 12-8-205, which limits camping in designated camping areas to 14 days and prohibits camps from being left unattended for more than 48 hours. Primitive overnight camping will be allowed outside of designated parking/camping areas along the river. Primitive camps will be allowed for a duration of 1 night and must be packed in by foot or boat. These rules will also apply to the Fertterer Property.

Physical Developments

Present

Existing physical developments on the Beckman WMA include external boundary fences (fair condition), internal pasture fences (poor to good condition), 2 older homes (1 is fair to good, the other is poor), 1 older barn (fair condition), a set of corrals (fair condition), 6 sheds or granaries (all dilapidated or poor), 3 wells located at the 2 residences/corrals, and 1 developed spring (fair condition). There are also 3 electric pump irrigation systems (gated pipe, wheel line and hand line), and 1 flood irrigation system, that are in fair condition.

Addition of the Fertterer Property brings with it livestock watering sites at a pumped well (windmill site), two permanent ponds, two ephemeral ponds and one undeveloped spring. A dilapidated cabin and three granaries come with the Property. No additional home sites are present.

Future

Fences will be replaced and/or repaired as needed. Internal pasture fences may be removed

and/or constructed to accommodate a redesigned livestock grazing system that incorporates both the WMA and Fertterer Property. Additional water developments are required to accommodate improved distribution of cattle in the upland and riparian areas. The WMA house, most recently used as a residence, is maintained as WMA headquarters for administrative purposes. The barn and corral located at the headquarters are also maintained for administrative and lessee purposes. All other buildings/sheds/granaries will be destroyed or removed.

Improvements to the flood and electric pump irrigation systems and their attendant irrigated fields would improve operational efficiency and are being sought. They include squaring the fields, changing the layout of the main and lateral water lines, pump replacement and construction of pump houses.

Wildlife

Present

Current wildlife use of the property includes the following animals (and/or groups of animals) and their present levels of use:

Primary species are mule and white-tailed deer. Mule deer occupy the upland coulees and ridges yearlong, but often make daily use of the alfalfa fields on the river bottom during periods when upland vegetation is desiccated. Mule deer numbers on the property fluctuate within and between years. Highest numbers are found during spring and fall. Through the years the lowest number of mule deer counted was 60, the highest number was 200. White-tailed deer, conversely, occupy the river bottoms yearlong except for brief forays to the uplands. Over the years their numbers have fluctuated between 20 and 50. Approximately 20 antelope utilize the WMA and Property intermittently on a seasonal basis. Mountain lions utilize the area occasionally, while bobcat, coyote, fox, badger and skunk are more common.

Addition of the Fertterer Property will substantially increase the involvement of sharp-tailed grouse in future management plans. They are common on the westernmost grassland benches of the Property. Ring-necked pheasants are common in the river bottom. Merriam's turkey utilize the property during late spring, summer and early fall. Thirty-five turkeys have been counted grouped up in early summer. Canada geese nest on the river while other species of waterfowl utilize it seasonally. A variety of songbirds, raptors, and small mammals use the area in undermined numbers on a seasonal or yearlong basis.

Future

Upon acquisition of the Property, habitat management strategies will be directed towards improving the habitat and carrying capacity for mule and white-tailed deer, pheasants, sharp-

tailed grouse, and other ground nesting waterfowl species. Other wildlife species adapted to more residual and woody vegetative cover, as well as agricultural crops such as alfalfa, will benefit. Predator species associated with prey that prefer such habitats will increase in number. Wildlife species that are adapted to exploit heavily utilized habitats will decline.

AREA MANAGEMENT

Management Goals

The primary goal for management of the Beckman WMA, including the addition of the Fertterer acres, will be to improve the condition of all vegetative plant communities. Implicit in this goal is a focus to maximize the productivity of the land base while minimizing maintenance and management requirements/involvement. Increased carrying capacities for mule and white-tailed deer can be expected as vegetation conditions improve and adequate quantities of forage remain available during key seasonal periods (e.g., winter and spring). This should reduce deer use of adjacent landowner's crops and pasture lands. The improvement of the habitat for mule and white-tailed deer will also benefit other game and nongame wildlife species.

A second and equally important goal will be to provide public access to the property for sport hunting and other recreational pursuits.

Management Actions

The most essential and important components of a wildlife management area are soil and vegetation. Every management action on the Area will be aimed at maintaining or improving the condition of vegetation and soils. Vegetative manipulations to improve habitat for wildlife may include livestock grazing, rest from livestock grazing, chemical and mechanical treatment, prescribed burning, and/or other common land management practices.

A change from present grazing practices to other grazing practices can be expected. This may include continuation of livestock grazing, but under a system that incorporates different stocking rates and more rest and rotation of pastures. Initial efforts will focus on quantifying the condition and trend of existing vegetation and establishing long-term monitoring efforts.

Biological, chemical, and mechanical treatments may be employed to reduce the occurrence of noxious weeds, to renovate or establish hay/farm land, to establish stands of woody vegetation, and/or to stimulate rangeland vegetation. All MFWP actions to control noxious weeds will be in accordance with the Department's weed management policy.

The use of fire may be prescribed to manipulate plant communities. An example would be to modify plant successional stages to increase the occurrence of desired shrub species. Any

such effort would be made in coordination with adjacent landowners and state and county officials.

Public use and access to the property will be managed consistent with MFWP's state and regional management objectives for WMA's. Recreation on the Beckman WMA is expected to increase. Deer and upland bird harvest in the area is expected to increase. Public use of the area will be consistent with resource protection goals (i.e., vegetation and soil stability). A winter use closure to all unauthorized activities will be implemented to address wildlife energetic needs (i.e., minimize the energy loss for deer and upland birds during energetically demanding/critical periods). This winter closure concept is in effect on all wildlife management areas within MFWP's Region 4. Other regulations as they specifically relate to this and other WMA's will also apply. These include permit-only fur trapping activities and a closure to mountain lion hunting after December 15.

MFWP will coordinate with adjacent landowners in developing certain land management plans/practices. These may include, but are not limited to: cooperative grazing systems, developing land trades, conservation easements, and/or additional land purchases. All practices will be considered first to conform to the intent of Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament. MFWP will promote its block management and hunting access programs with adjacent landowners affected by the acquisition of the Beckman WMA and subsequently, the Fertterer Property. Public entities such as the Bureau of Land Management, Farm Services Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Fergus County Conservation District, Fergus County Extension Service, and the Fergus County Commissioners will be consulted and met with as requested and needed.

An annual "in lieu of taxes" payment will be made by MFWP to Fergus County in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen (MCA 87-1-603).

Management Objectives

Manipulating vegetative plant communities on the Beckman WMA is expected to increase yearlong usage by mule and white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and pheasants. The population objective is to have 120 mule deer and 60 white-tailed deer on the WMA during early fall. The population objective for ring-necked pheasants is to increase the number of males in spring to 5X the current number. The population objective for sharp-tailed grouse is to increase total numbers by 2X.

MFWP will continue its aggressive approach to weed management on the Beckman WMA. Noxious weeds will be identified, mapped, and controlled in a manner consistent with MFWP's Region 4 Weed Management Plan. There are 2 objectives for weed management on the Beckman WMA. (1) Stop the spread of noxious weeds, and (2) reduce the

occurrence of noxious weeds on the Beckman WMA. MFWP will use its own personnel and/or private contractors, and coordinate with adjacent landowners and county weed boards for weed control.

Impacts

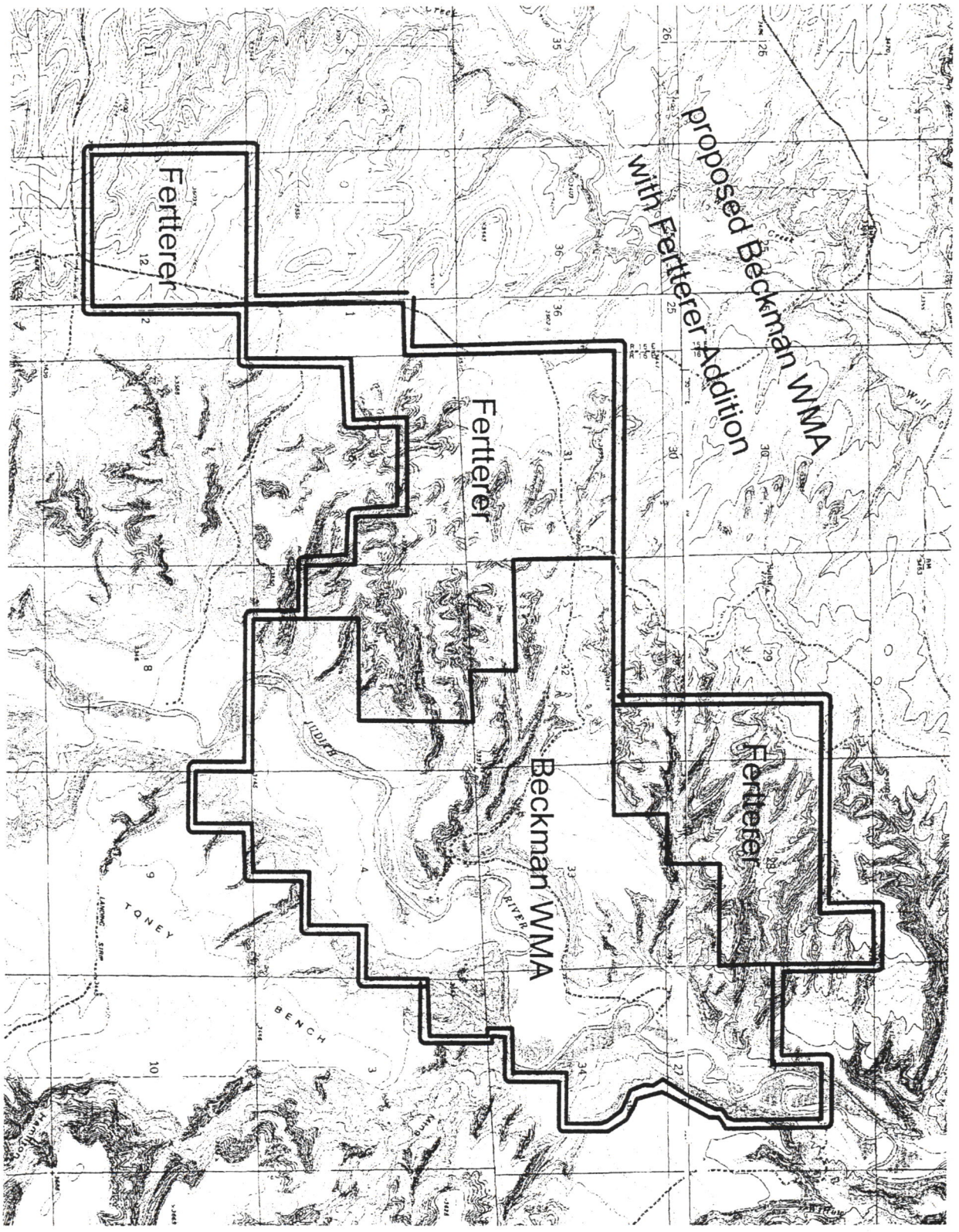
Proposed changes in management direction for the Beckman WMA -- adjustments to some land use practices -- will benefit the wildlife currently using the area. Improving habitat quality and quantity will assist in alleviating potential deer problems on adjacent private lands. Should game depredation occur, one or more of the following methods will be implemented: scare guns; temporary panels for haystacks; materials for permanent haystack yards; kill permits; and special hunting seasons. A combination of the above methods would be used as necessary to resolve problems that might occur.

Public use of the property will be guaranteed from April 1 through December 15. Use during this period will be consistent with the established management/travel plan.

Management Activities

Aerial and ground surveys and inventories of wildlife use of the area will be conducted. The area will be used on occasion for capturing and individually marking deer and other wildlife as research needs arise. Changes in numbers and patterns of use by deer and other big game and wildlife species will be documented. Vegetation sampling and evaluation will be conducted on a regular basis. Other land management specialists and agencies will be contacted as needed for technical assistance in order to implement specified management actions. Physical developments will be evaluated relative to management goals and objectives. Historic and cultural values and a final management plan will dictate the extent of physical development and activity that's needed. Entrance and boundary signs will be erected to facilitate public use and to inform the public of the benefits and opportunities in the area.

Appendix I


proposed Beckman WMA
with Fertterer Addition
Fertterer
Fertterer
Fertterer
Beckman WMA
TONEY
BENCH
RIVER